

# The Conflict in Syria

## Understanding and Avoiding Regional Spillover Effects

As the conflict in Syria between a loose confederation of rebel factions and the Assad regime unfolds over time, it is easy to forget that the conflict is not taking place in a vacuum. Patrons and neighbors such as Iran, Russia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Arab Gulf States are pouring financial and military aid into Syria to determine the outcome of the conflict. Such outside support can perpetuate the existing civil war in Syria and ignite larger regional hostilities between Sunni and Shia areas that could reshape the political geography of the Middle East. In fact, we are already seeing the historical hatreds between extremists on both sides of the conflict spill over, spreading fear and influencing political sentiment and opportunism north and east into Turkey and Iraq; west into Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine; and south into Jordan and the Arabian Gulf states.

RAND researchers focused on understanding the potential for violent spillover from the conflict in Syria. Extremist ideologies, ethnic sentiment, and religious anger know no boundaries when it comes to the spread of a violent conflict. Refugee flows bring ideologies and transmit anger that radicalizes youth and neighboring populations who share lineage and language. Geography provides access and facilitates the

### Syria and Neighboring States



### Key findings:

- The armed conflict literature shows that external military support, large numbers of refugees, and the fragility of neighboring states contribute to the spread of violence from civil war and insurgency.
- These prominent factors and some additional ones are all present in varying degrees in the Levant.
- There is a high probability that the fighting in Syria, if left unchecked, will spill over into Turkey and Jordan.
- Measures to avoid spillover include intervening early and either negotiating or imposing a settlement; working with allies and neighboring states to stem the flow of foreign fighters and external aid, prevent the influx of refugees, and provide safe zones for their return; and providing military and financial assistance to neighboring states (not warring parties) to secure borders and inoculate such states from instability.
- These measures will likely require some type of international stabilization force and a partial no-fly zone and acknowledging that Bashar al-Assad may have to be part of the solution and Syria may have to be divided.

further spread of these ideas, along with the movement of people and weapons. The violence can easily spill over into adjoining societies where conditions already may be fragile.

To understand the spillover effects, researchers examined the literature of armed conflict to determine the main factors that are likely to contribute to or impede the spread of violence from civil war and insurgency and then examined how they apply to Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan.

### What Factors Contribute to Spillover?

The literature on armed conflict shows that three prominent factors contribute directly to the spread of violence from civil war and insurgency: external military support, large numbers of refugees, and the fragility of neighboring states.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>2014</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2014 to 00-00-2014</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Conflict in Syria: Understanding and Avoiding Regional Spillover Effects</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA, 90407-2138</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>3</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

Beyond these prominent factors, five other factors can contribute conflict spillover: ethnic ties, access to open media, perceived uncertainty and government overreaction by neighbors, timing and effectiveness of intervention, and government and insurgent capabilities.

### What Is the Current Situation in the Region?

All the factors leading to the spread of violent conflict from civil war and insurgency—both the prominent and other ones—are present in varying degrees in the Levant. There is a high probability that the fighting in Syria, if left unchecked, will spill over into Turkey and Jordan; both countries are engaged in providing external aid to the rebels and both are serving as hosts to large numbers of refugees with ethnic ties to their own populations. Jordan is especially vulnerable because of its fragile economic condition and the potential political impact of demographic changes within its society.

Violence has already spread into Lebanon because of the support Hizbollah is giving to the Assad regime in Damascus, and appears to be contributing to the ever-present and complicated sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia in Iraq. The strengthening of militant groups like al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra in the border areas inside eastern Syria and western Iraq does not bode well for the stability of Baghdad or the region, which is viewed best as an extended part of an interconnected, dynamic whole and as a perceived battle for survival between Sunni and Shia, as well as an opportunity for either side to attack Israel. The tight geography of the region, where everyone is in close proximity, makes spillover easier and more likely.

### How Can We Avoid Spillover?

To impede the spillover of violence now occurring in Lebanon and Iraq and to reverse the likelihood of it spreading

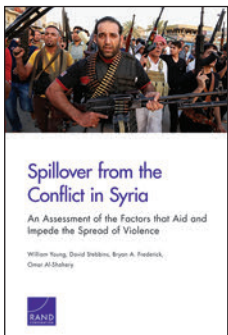
into Turkey and Jordan, the underlying causes of the spillover in the region must be addressed. Based on the literature and an analysis of the factors at play in the Levant, it is necessary to:

- Intervene early and either negotiate or impose a settlement to prevent civilian casualties and the creation of refugee populations that inevitably lead to a hardening of positions and an intensification of conflict
- Work with allies and neighboring states to stem the flow of foreign fighters and external aid, prevent the influx of refugees, and provide safe zones for their return
- Provide military and financial assistance to the neighboring states (not to the warring parties) to secure borders and inoculate neighboring states against the instability that accompanies the spread of radical ideologies, economic hardship, and war.

These measures will likely require some type of international stabilization force and a partial no-fly zone. They will also likely require acknowledging that Bashar al-Assad may have to be part of the solution and that Syria may have to be divided.

Policy measures focused solely on addressing the effects of the spillover itself, such as helping Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan deal with the flow of refugees within their borders, are likely to be insufficient—the equivalent of a doctor treating only the visible symptoms of an infectious disease, while the patient and others nearby continue to be at risk.

All roads lead to Damascus and back out again, but in different ways and directions. With hundreds of jihadists from Europe, Russia, the Gulf states, and the United States fighting in Syria, Europe and the rest of the West and Arab Gulf States will become likely return destinations for them and the skills they have acquired.



This research brief describes work done in the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Spillover from the Conflict in Syria: An Assessment of the Factors That Aid and Impede the Spread of Violence*, by William G. Young, David Stebbins, Bryan A. Frederick, and Omar Al-Shahery, RR-609-OSD, 2014 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR609](http://www.rand.org/t/RR609)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2014

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